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### GOOD NEWS AND BAD NEWS

I don't know how you feel about all the parables we've been hearing lately:

- the Sower and the Soils, the Wheat and the Weeds, and today, five more.
  - One of the reasons we're getting all these is because Matthew's Gospel is organized to include three large teaching blocks, like the Sermon on the Mount.
  - This one includes lots of parables and it seems like all of these begin with the words, "The Kingdom of Heaven is like..."

Couldn't JESUS just be more direct?

- Couldn't HE just tell us the reality of Heaven instead of these images?
    - Well, maybe HE can't because there are just no human words or images to describe Heaven, though we've certainly tried.
    - Truth be told, though, our versions of heaven have not always been the best.
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Joel Stein, a columnist for the LA Times says this:

- *Heaven is totally overrated. It seems boring. Clouds, listening to people play the harp. It should be somewhere you can't wait to go, like a luxury hotel. Maybe blue skies and soft music were enough to keep people in line in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, but Heaven has to step it up a bit. They're basically getting by because they only have to be better than Hell.*
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How would you describe the Kingdom of Heaven?

- (Take a moment right now and tell the person next to you.)
  - Are you having trouble?
    - Is it hard to describe when you've never been there?
  - If you can, it probably looks a lot like what you need it to be, and less like what the Bible says,
    - more about how we think GOD should have made it.
  - Maybe human language just isn't adequate to describe Heaven, or do it justice, so the best JESUS can do is to tell us about it in parables.
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Today, five parables, again about the Kingdom of Heaven.

- Matthew uses this phrase 33 times in his Gospel.
- Mark and Luke, instead use "the Kingdom of GOD."

In JESUS' parables about the Kingdom of Heaven/GOD, HE reveals the place of GOD'S rule as both a future hope (what it will be), but also as a present possibility (what can be now).

- In a sense, JESUS isn't describing Heaven literally, but rather how we ought to think about Heaven.
    - It's sort of like trying to give someone the idea of Disneyland:
      - you might describe it by talking about rides and characters,
      - but in doing so, you're encouraging them to think about it as the happiest place on earth.
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So, in today's parables you have:

- the Mustard Seed and the Yeast that talk about going from small to big, from lesser to greater;
- the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price to talk about the value of the Kingdom of Heaven;
- and the Net, a story of final judgment, like the Wheat and the Weeds last week where some are gathered and some are cast off.

So, you have four that mostly make us feel good—that tell good news,

- and one that makes us worry—that tells some bad news.

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It reminds me of that song by DeWayne Blackwell, recorded by Sam the Sham and the Pharoah's in 1966, "Oh, That's Good, No, That's Bad."

- Not long ago I was walkin' down the street  
When a woman in a car knocked me off my feet  
(And you say: "Oh, that's bad.")  
No, that's good  
My insurance paid me a lot of dough  
More money than I'd seen in a year's payroll  
(Oh, that's good.)  
No, that's bad.  
On doctor bills is where my money went  
And all I had left was a very bad limp  
(Oh, that's bad)  
No, that's good  
'Cause the way I walked got me a role  
As the Marshall's partner on a TV show  
Pretty young actresses started hangin' 'round  
And every night we'd do the town  
(Oh, that's good)  
No, that's bad  
I ended up back in a hospital bed  
'Cause my horse fell on my bad leg  
(Oh, that's bad)  
No, that's good  
But just when I was feelin' my worst  
I fell in love with a beautiful nurse  
(Oh, that's good)  
No, that's bad  
'Cause I found out she was the doctor's wife  
Now, I'll be in a wheelchair the rest of my life  
'Cause no matter how I pleaded and begged  
He operated on my good leg  
(Oh, that's bad)  
No, that's awful

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These parables share good news and bad news.

- Let's start by looking at the bad news.
- The Parable of the Net seems to be a story of judgment,
- the separating of the good from the bad, the wicked from the righteous.
    - Wicked sounds a little harsh, doesn't it?
      - Anybody know someone who is just plain wicked?
      - Wicked here refers to those who reject GOD,
        - those who place other things ahead of GOD.
    - Righteous are those who say, "Yes," to GOD and who seek to do GOD'S will.
      - Righteous doesn't mean perfect.
      - It means trying to put GOD first as much as possible.

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There was a time where I believed in universalism, the idea that everyone goes to Heaven.

- I clung to this belief because I knew the sin in my life and that I wasn't good enough for Heaven.

- My only hope (or so I thought) was that GOD would take everyone.

The problem was that there were parables like this that seemed to say,

- "Some are in and some are out."

Thankfully, I came to understand GOD'S grace,

- that it is by faith alone that we are saved.

- Just by believing in GOD'S unconditional love shown in JESUS CHRIST, we're in.

But what about those who don't believe? Three things came to me:

- 1) It's not our place to judge who's in and who's out.

- 2) I need to live my life as best I'm able seeking to do GOD'S will.

- 3) I need to do all I can to invite others to get to know the LORD OF LOVE better.

So, maybe the parable is bad news, but maybe there's also good news.

What about the good news, then, in these parables?

- How should we think about the Kingdom of Heaven?

The Mustard Seed and the Yeast start out small but become great.

- We may get glimpses of Heaven, those moments when we know GOD is at work, that feeling when you sense GOD'S presence.

- They may just be small moments, but they tell us what the Kingdom of GOD will be like all the time and in big ways when it comes in its fullness.

The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl speak of the value of the Kingdom.

- JESUS may not be able to tell us in words we can understand, but HE wants us to think about the Kingdom as something so wonderful, so precious, so desirable that it would be worth giving up absolutely everything else.

- That's how special the Kingdom of Heaven is!

- And that's good news!

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So, a little homework this week to help you better understand what JESUS is doing with these parables and of what HE'S trying to get you to think about the Kingdom of Heaven.

- This week, maybe even this afternoon, create your own parable for the Kingdom of Heaven.

- Not just something made up or imagined.

- Not just something kind of nice.

- Use earthly images or experiences that others will recognize.

When my late wife, Lori, did this she envisioned eating the best meal she'd ever had at a restaurant, and when the bill came, there was no charge.

You can do this, too.

- This is an important and worthwhile exercise, because in doing so, not only are you better understanding the Kingdom of Heaven,

- you also are practicing sharing the Kingdom with others.

- You are making a connection between this reality and the possibility of the Kingdom of Heaven, a connection you can share with others.

- And when you come up with your parable, let me know what it is.

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JESUS spent a lot of time explain the Kingdom of Heaven because even when it seems to be far away or absent, it is still there.

- Your parable, when you share it, may be the message that someone else needs to hear,

- to assure them that, even when the Kingdom of Heaven seems far away or can't be seen, the Kingdom of Heaven is actually near.